XULAneXUS

Volume 15 | Issue 1 Article 3

12-1-2017

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Volume 15, Issue 1, December 2017. Research Manuscript. 28-35.
<http://xulanexus.xula.edu/textpattern/index.php?id=117>

Race as a Social Construct: Evolution of Black Ascription

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Abstract
Throughout history, people of African descent have been designated by different terms. Discourse in this paper will center on the United States of America, whereby people are defined politically as *black* and *white* based on *race* as a social construct. From 1607-1865 (258 years), in the eventual United States of America, *slavery* was a parallel social construct. Although blacks were emancipated after 1865, many whites in power still did not intend to deal with them as humans. Therefore, these whites began to address blacks as a symbol. The purpose of this research is to examine how ascription of African Americans evolved from 1865-1985. From 1865-1900, symbolic racism permeated throughout promotion of popular culture whereby, among additional negative terms, blacks were referred to as *coon, bucks, mammies* and *boys*. From 1900-1966, racism took a turn to ascribe blacks to a generic term aimed at denigration. Until 1925 blacks were addressed in the media as lower-case *negroes* and were then referred to in print as upper case *Negroes*, followed at intervals by the ascriptions *colored*, *black*, and Afro-American. Beginning in December of 1988, there was a call by Jessie Jackson at a national conference that blacks be referred to as African American.

Key Terms:
- Ascription
- Symbolic Racism
- Stereotypes
- Social Construction
- Political Correctness

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Introduction

Beginning with the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 and until the end of the War Between the States (Civil War, 1861 to 1865), what eventually became the United States of America rested on the foundation of race as a social construct. When the first English ships docked along the eastern Atlantic seaboard in North America, Europeans designated themselves as *Christian, free, English,* and *white*. Winthrop Jordan offers commentary: "A Maryland law of 1681 used all four terms in one short paragraph."[1] On the other side of the line, Africans were designated as black. This sub form of race as a social construct served to enable the English to deviate from designating people by ethnicity and heritage. By stripping others of their origin and ascribing them a color (race), the English could unequally distribute rewards to themselves and place restrictions on Africans. Advancement of this ideology has served to justify the dehumanizing of Africans and Native Americans throughout history, yet this accounted for the explosion of the American Revolution (1775 to 1783), and the Civil War (1861 to 1865). After 1865, whites lost the foothold to apply to people of African descent, the ascription "slave" as an associated "badge of dishonor." This accounted for a shift in ascription toward evolutionary turning points: blacks addressed as symbols such as *boy* and *mammy* from 1865 to 1900; via generic terms such as *Negro*, *colored*, and *black* from 1900 to 1985; and by ethnicity and heritage as African American from 1985 to the present.

Discourse

Following the end of slavery in 1865, whites throughout the South were outraged that their "gold" (slaves) had been freed. To alleviate racial tension and their fear of blacks' development, whites realized they had to implement other means to control them. From 1865 to 1900, symbolic racism would permeate the U.S. relative to new symbols or names for successive generation of former slaves as whites' ideologies evolved. During this time, the more common ascription applied to blacks was "coons," "bucks," and "mammies" to belittle them. The depiction of blacks as coons served to amuse whites, who laughed at those formerly enslaved for thinking they would be allowed to assimilate into "white" culture. Stefanie Laufs takes the following position on the promotion of symbolic racism: "The Black Buck is as violent as the Black Brute. Moreover, he is characterized as a single African American person who is big, dark, mostly feared by white men, and sexually attracted to white women."[2] This belief reinforced the idea that alleged crimes, especially rape, could and would incur reprimand by lynching black men. Similarly, mammy degraded elderly black women, who were the primary caretakers of their masters and their children. Continual use of this term throughout the 1800s reinforces the stereotype that black women were submissive, the property of white men, and content under chattel slavery.

Plessy v Ferguson (1896) declared segregation as the law of the land. Given promotion of the "separate but equal" doctrine, blacks were further denigrated. Popular culture platforms such as minstrel shows reinforced symbolic racism. Whites took entertainment from the plantation to the stage by performing in "black face." Born in 1828, Dartmouth Rice's "Jim Crow" caricature personified the racial conditions of the time. Jean H. Baker offers commentary:

> Popular culture not only defined the nature of the Negro's inferiority but also provided a domain within which Democrats developed specific public policies. By using its language and symbols, party leaders linked popular sentiments to party agenda. The two

> worlds – the one in which racial intentions were expressed in popular activities from minstrelsy to rioting, the other in which Democratic leaders articulated public policies – were connected.[3]

This highlights how minstrelsy foreshadowed Jim Crow measures, a systematic racial caste system that governed the South. Along with the symbols, black face and stereotypical characters such as "Old Darky" served as sentiments of the Civil War through their portrayal of blacks as being content with plantation life. Consequently, black face also substituted the definition of "blackness" for free blacks in the North who had never had contact with those in the South. Additionally, once blacks eventually could appear on stage in minstrel shows, they had to don an even blacker face. This further denigrated them as a people in the U.S.

Minstrelsy became a booming business because whites did not have to hide their fascination with blacks socially, physically, and sexually. However, the practice of minstrelsy and showcasing of black face back-fired beginning with World War I in 1914. Whites realized if they sent all their sons to fight in the war, they would have no all-white league left to control the rest of their world. The demand for black labor to support war industries contributed to the Great Migration (1915 to 1960) of approximately five hundred thousand blacks from the South to the North. During the first wave in 1920, 52% of the U.S. became urbanized as black families populated neighborhoods previously inhabited by whites.[4] Relocated blacks did not tolerate celebrated satirical minstrel shows nor black face in the North. Upon their return, white soldiers were outraged that the country for which their comrades had fought for and died had allowed the integration of their communities. Their resentment prompted excessive race riots in 1919, deeming the period "The Red Summer" due to all the bloodshed. "A general agreement stands that at least 25 riots occurred that year, of which 7 were 'major': Chicago, Elaine, Knoxville, Charleston, DC, Longview, and Omaha. In all of the riots, groups of hysterical white people performed the violence, and groups of black people or their property caught the violence."[5] Yet blacks refused to back down because they had served in the same war. Faced with public scrutiny from foreign nations, whites realized they had to change their tactic. This brought the system to its second evolutionary turning point: reconstructing social constructs.

Following the end of World War I in November of 1918, a period of "reconstruction" was observed, whereby whites continuously worked to undermine resistance by blacks. During this time, the United States' labor markets and social relations were strained under the stress of demobilization and race riots. Whites could no longer trick blacks into believing that their political definitions of race were so pronounced now that they had been exposed to culture in Europe. During this period,

> Immigrants were under strong pressure to assimilate, and the Sixty-sixth Congress passed an Americanization Act…And there was the American Legion, organized in France in February 1919, relaunched on American soil at St. Louis a few months later. The Legion was pledged to work for "100 percent Americanism."[6]

As the official watchdogs of the process, the American Legion of Soldiers could take back the power they felt had been encroached upon by blacks while they were away. The broad appliance of the program ensured the conversion of all foreigners into politically defined white Americans after the war. In other words, hyphenated Americans in the U.S. would

become null and void. "[Woodrow] Wilson had warned about the dangers of the "hyphenate" vote during the 1916 campaign. With Theodore Roosevelt crisscrossing the country in 1915 and 1916 calling for preparedness and 100 percent Americanism even before America's entry into the war, a patriotic mood swept the land."[7] People who were once viewed as family were now perceived to be the common enemy. In this way, the United States could continue its imperial pursuit while assuaging the stress of their members who were loyal to the all-white league.

The discriminatory doctrine "separate but equal" was maintained throughout the Americanization process, and served to exclude all people of African descent in the United States, who were now being marked by the ascription "negro." Blacks faced cultural, class, and racial discrimination relative to programs promoted under Americanization because they did not identify with the prescribed criteria. Designation of blacks in a lower-case fashion served whites' purpose of generalizing them and maintaining master-slave dynamics in their interaction. History repeated itself whereby whites refused to respect blacks as a people, preferring to address them as a symbol rather than by name. This also included proper titles such as "Sir," "Mister," "Miss," "Ms.," "Mrs.," and "Ma'am." Within the grand scheme of the Americanization process, negroes could never be converted into whites.

After the war, blacks expressed concern about continual subjection to labels and resulting social consequence. Given scrutiny from abroad, and pressure on the home front, by 1919, the *Negro Year Book* could report:

> There is an increasing use of the word 'Negro' and a decreasing use of the word 'colored' and 'Afro-American' to designate us as a people …During this same period, there was an aggressive campaign for capitalization of the word "Negro." This campaign…peaked in 1930 when the *New York Times* announced that it would print the word "Negro" with a capital letter. In an editorial (March 7, 1930), the newspaper said: "In our 'style book' 'Negro' is now added to the list of words to be capitalized. It is not merely a typographical change; it is an act of recognition of racial self-respect for those who have been for generations in 'the lower case.'" [8]

Everyone of African descent in the United States was now publicly addressed as an upper case "Negro." This new label was constructed to apply to all "members of the Negroid race," and fit the existing construction of race. Lerone Bennet Jr., Rowland A. Barton, and W.E.B Dubois offered perspective on the issue:

> The English word "Negro" is a derivative of the Spanish and Portuguese word *negro*, which means black. This word, which was not capitalized at first, fused not only with humanity, nationality and place of origin but also certain white judgments about the inherent and irredeemable inferiority of the person so designated. The word also referred to certain Jim Crow places, i.e., the "negro pew" in Christian churches.[9]

The mention of whites' resentment at capitalizing the term negro accounted for the process of reconstruction transitioning to its next label, "colored." The irony was not lost on how every other non-native group of people living in the United States was addressed by a name that recognized their ethnicity and heritage, while blacks were not. Whites had to construct a name that was specifically designed for blacks because no "Negro" or "colored" land is listed on the

world map. Primarily in English-speaking countries such as the U.S. and Great Britain, the term "colored" is a derogatory term used to emphasize people of non-white descent of the person. During apartheid in South Africa, the term simply described people who were considered neither black nor white. The racist undertone of the term is also exemplified by the U.S. census and death certificates that have counted/viewed colored people and Negroes.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), organized in 1909, advanced similar sentiments. By absorbing W.E.B Dubois' Niagara Movement membership (1906-1909), whites were able to establish a national organization that still designated blacks as a symbol, given the word 'Colored' in the organization's title. Although blacks would take back some of the power given to the term with the New Negro Movement during the 1920s, whites would turn this cultural arts component of an experiment into a circus act by trying to orchestrate how "blackness" should be portrayed to the world. Yet as blacks observed more hate crimes being committed against them such as the Scottsboro Nine case (1930s), and the murder of Emmett Till (1955), they grew more discontent with these social constructs. This resentment accounted for escalation of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which served to end segregation and discrimination in the U.S. by reframing a negative. Redefining "black" as something positive brought the system to its current evolutionary turning point: addressing blacks by ethnicity and heritage as African Americans.

From 1966 to 1985, blacks in the United States began their campaign to redefine themselves in the eyes of the world. Nonviolent tactics embraced during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement accounted for major waves in legislation, given passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) under President Lyndon B. Johnson, but lacking was fervor necessary for enforcement. Blacks were still at a disadvantage economically and politically since they lacked the class status and office positions needed to redress their predicament. Jobs advanced by World War I industries accounted for inaugural relocation of whites to the suburbs, leaving blacks in impoverished ghettos in substandard houses. Unemployment rates were high among their population, political representation was limited, and access to higher education remained largely segregated throughout the country. The grimmer detail during this time was the fact that the police departments primarily were still segregated. Race crimes in the 1930s and 1950s had left a bad taste in blacks' mouths concerning the three branches of government.

Beginning in 1966, blacks took an active role in protecting themselves against the violence associated with current social constructs. If they wanted safer neighborhoods, better living conditions and overall quality of life, they could no longer wait on white America to accord them justice. Thus the Black Panther Party (BPP) was formed in Oakland, California. What began as a collective of black students' study groups and political organizations evolved into a revolutionary nationalist organization for all black people in the United States. The leader, Huey P. Newton, channeled the anger expressed by ghetto riots towards police brutality into a task force against the city's police department. In this way, BPP managed to monitor the police and assert a sort of forced political power. Lazerow Jama and Yohuru Williams take the following position on the issue: "As Huey Newton observed, The Panther uniform – powder-blue shirt, black leather jacket, and beret – represented a symbolic union of political principles."[10]

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's leader Stokely Carmichael rallied for similar sentiments at conferences in Mississippi, with his revolutionary demand: "We want black power!" These movements were complementary in the way ideas were projected, such as "black is Beautiful!" These reversals of the social construct "black" alienated whites as blacks revisited their African heritage. Peniel E. Joseph proffers, "Black Power, beginning with its revision of black identity, transformed America's racial, social, and political landscape. In a pre-multicultural age where race shaped hope, opportunity, and identity, Black Power provided new words, images, and politics."[11] This highlights how blacks learned to master the English language to reframe and craft social constructs to extol themselves by wearing African clothes, hairstyles, and additional cultural icons. However, dissolution of the Black Panther Party in 1982 signaled the decline of the calls for "black power" in 1985 as blacks realized the grave mistake they had made in buying into the social construct, "black," that was designed to undermine them.[12]

The fact that the ascription, "black," was still working against them was forcefully driven home under President Richard Nixon's administration (1969-1974). Though he began his "War on Drugs" campaign in 1971 with the declaration that it was "public enemy number one," the detrimental effect for blacks lasted throughout the 1980s, given the incarceration of drug traffickers. Whites could apply the ascription against blacks without it directly affecting their social relations on the world stage. John Ehrlichman, Nixon's aide, admitted to journalist Dan Baum for *Harper's Magazine* that Nixon's target after 1968 was black people.[13] The U.S. government deliberately lied to get Americans to associate blacks with drugs so that they would be justified in criminalizing them, breaking up their homes, arresting their leaders (i.e., BPP), and vilifying them on the evening news. Paula Mallea takes the following position of the issue: "The War on Drugs was never about the drugs. Decisions to ban drugs have been based on political expediency, prejudice, and ignorance. Those affected by this unfair "war" are disproportionately the marginalized of our society."[14]

Although socially grim for the black community, the change for recognizing black people in the U.S. as African American was announced and promoted by Jesse Jackson at a news conference in December 1988:

> Leaders of the movement to change the language say…they want to shift the definition of the group from the racial description black to a cultural and ethnic identity that ties the group to its continent of origin and fosters dignity and self-esteem… "This is deeper than just name recognition," said Mr. Jackson who, along with others, called for the change at the news conference in late December. "Black tells you about skin color and what side of town you live on. African American evokes discussion of the world."[15]

During his political quests Jackson realized that to mend division among his people meant educating them about the root of their problems. Jackson sought to teach his people that they were kidnapped from Africa and brought to live in America as slaves during the 1600s. Since no white person could pin point when they had stopped being African, they were to be addressed via ethnicity and heritage. Though this bold assertion by African Americans as an independent nation within the United States was not received with favor among whites, they had no choice but to acquiesce.

People of African descent living in the United States of America have suffered a great

deal under the social constructions of race. Throughout history, white America has worked to construct understanding about the world to promote amongst themselves privileged and shared assumptions about reality. It seems it has always been a privilege to be white and have insight about the purpose for the evolving nature of black ascription. Through popular culture, symbolic racism found a starting point to promote constructs and "standards" for appropriation. This social illness prevailed until 1988, when African Americans promoted being addressed by ethnicity and heritage. It is fair to say that the world played a prominent role in this accomplishment whenever executing their watchdog tactic and refusal to conduct business with an international manipulator.

End Notes

[1] Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: Attitudes Toward the Negro,* (New York: W. W Norton & Company, 1968), 80.

[2] Stefanie Laufs, *Fighting a Movie with Lightning; "Birth of a Nation" and the Black Community,* (Germany: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013), 56.

[3] Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of a Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 213.

[4] Taeuber Karl and Alba Taeuber, *The American Negro Reference Book*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966), 122.

[5] Jan Voogd, *Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919,* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 2.

[6] Geoffrey Perret, *America in the Twenties: A History,* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1982), 80.

[7] David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s,* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1919), 148.

[8] Lerone Bennett Jr., "What's in a Name? Negro vs. Afro-American vs. Black," *Ebony* 23 (December 1967), 48.

[9] Lerone Bennett Jr., Roland A. Barton, and W.E.B Dubois, "What's in a name? Negro vs. Afro-American vs. Black," *A Review of General Semantics* 26.4 (December 1969): 400.

[10] Lazerow Jama and Yohuru Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

[11] Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America,* (London: Macmillan, 2007), *43.*

[12] Lazerow Jama and Yohuru Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 37.

[13] Baum, Dan. "Legalize it All: How to Win the War on Drugs." *Harper's Magazine,* April 2016.

[14] Paula Mallea, *The War on Drugs: A Failed Experiment*, (Canada: Dundurn Press, 2014), 48.

[15] Wilkerson, Isabel. "African-American Favored by Many of America's Blacks." *New York Times,* January 31, 1989.

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Acknowledgements

This research is for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course, Introduction to African American History and Culture (AFAM 2000). I would like to thank Dr. Ronald Dorris for working with me to conduct research and to write this manuscript.